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# *In the Contra Chasm*

## Two War Heroes, Battling on Opposite Sides on the Hill

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John Singlaub and Charles Liteky are men of war. Fragments of shrapnel, war's small reminders, remain in their bodies. Both have heroes' medals. Both still feel a call to patriotism and honor.

Today they are advocates on opposing sides of the battle over aid to Nicaraguan rebels (contras)—the contentious issue that, once again, is high drama on Capitol Hill and in the White House. President Reagan heavily lobbies for his proposal to provide the rebels with $100 million—$70 million of it military assistance—to fight "the malignancy in Managua." There are closed meetings and press conferences, White House sessions and arm-twisting phone calls, charges of scare tactics and redbaiting.

Watching it unfold and playing their own part to influence the outcome, Singlaub, a retired major general, and Liteky, a congressional Medal of Honor winner, remember past battlegrounds, the killing and dying that shaped their views.

Many members of Congress are uncomfortable with absolutes; in the growing grayness of the Nicaraguan struggle there are no easy "good guys versus bad guys." Their decision hinges on whether they buy Reagan's claim, or the opposing view that contra aid means certain escalation.

However, for Singlaub, of the far right, and Liteky, a former chaplain now of the religious left, certitude is strong. They are archetypal combatants, representative of the high passions and opposing views to be heard tomorrow as the House begins debate.

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Despite a slight limp, a reminder of long-ago parachute jumps, Singlaub stalks the halls of Congress with a quickness that belies his 64 years. Singlaub's hair has never been released from its stiff military brush cut except for a time during World War II while running covert operations in France, when he disguised himself as a Frenchman, a cover that would have been blown as soon as the enemy heard his flat American accent.

Singlaub is remembered as the chief of staff of U.S. troops in Korea who was relieved of command after publicly denouncing President Carter's plan to remove troops from Korea. Now he is chairman of an anticommunist brigade that raises millions from private citizens to fund the contras. He is welcomed in Reagan's White House and meets with aide Pat Buchanan, whose heavy-handed tactics ("the Democratic Party will reveal whether it stands with Ronald Reagan and the resistance or Daniel Ortega and the communists") incensed many on the Hill, who charged "McCarthyism."

You can't have a revolution these days without a public relations firm and Singlaub is shepherded by two Clews Communications consultants from press conference to TV shows, from White House meetings to Capitol Hill.

A consultant suggests that Singlaub appear on one show with a representative of the Soviet Embassy. "Listen! I'm fed up with giving time to those miserable propagandists." Singlaub makes nervous facial grimaces as he sits like a coiled spring in the office of Rep. Richard Cheney (R-Wyo.), an ally who says the votes aren't there yet. Singlaub, brow furrowing on a sharply chiseled face, says fervently that this is the result of "sophisticated disinformation on the part of the Sandinistas."

He dismisses the argument for negotiating through the Contadora process as a "very clever stalling ploy." There is urgency in his voice. "A congressman has *got* to know that if he votes any delay, votes against this proposal, it will guarantee that U.S. troops are going to have to be used there."

Cheney says, "The biggest problem is getting access to the Democratic side of the aisle." Singlaub nods eager assent as Cheney says, "We will be aggressively working the members and maybe we will ask you to pick up the phone."

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Meanwhile, Charlie Liteky (pronounced Lit-key) is approaching the Capitol with 200 other protesters. Forming a long line, they carry cross after cross with the name, age and date of death, documented killings by the contras, such as Victoriano Reyez, age 55, killed this January. Liteky, 55, a tall, slim, graying man in a brown suit, wearing bifocals, stands next to a woman in a wheelchair holding her cross—Benigo Hernandez Calderon, killed 12/27/85, age 16.

A huge sign says, "Sorrow: 10,000 killed. Hope: No Contra Aid."

"My name is Charlie Liteky," he begins. "I'm a Vietnam veteran. For my service in Vietnam, Congress gave me the highest military award. I tell you that, in case anybody wonders if I'm soft on communism," Liteky adds dryly, a pointed reference to the redbaiting frequently directed toward those who oppose contra aid. "I'm here to plead 'remember Vietnam' and get out before it's too late. Not a single country in the world has joined Reagan in his embargo. I am *appalled* at the documented atrocities." His voice rising, Liteky says, "We are making another quagmire!"

He repeats the story of a woman he met recently in Nicaragua: "I spoke with a mother whose son had been mutilated by the contras. She placed her hand on my chest and said, 'Go to President Reagan. Place your hand on his chest. Ask him to stop killing us.' "

The Witness for Peace group forms a large cross on the Capitol steps. Remembrances of yesterday are in the lined faces of such protesters as William Sloane Coffin. Liteky's tenor voice joins the group singing "Amazing Grace."

When such religious groups are mentioned to Singlaub, he replies that Sandinista leader "Tomas Borgé calls them his army of useful fools."

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Debate over Nicaragua has escalated into fights over which side commits the most atrocities. And a new form of body count has emerged—whether there are more former Sandinistas or Somocistas in the contra brigade. (Singlaub says Somoza's old national guard, which specialized in death squads, comprises "only 1 percent" of the contras; Liteky argues "that 1 percent happens to be the *leaders* among the contras"). Members of Congress and activists on both sides compare anecdotal information to prove, on the one hand, that the Sandinistas are oppressive, lying communists and, on the other, that the contras are rapists and murderers.

As the struggle for votes continues, Singlaub and Rep. Robert Dornan (R-Calif.) sit in the corner of the Capitol Hill Club, assessing the value of their morning's press conference with Alvardo Baldizon, a former Nicaraguan deputy interior minister who defected to the United States. Baldizon claims that East German-trained Nicaraguans, disguised as contras, had slaughtered civilians. "Killing their own people to make a political point!" exclaims Dornan.

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